

School Truancy: A Look at Self Esteem and Poverty

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Abstract

School systems across the nation had noticed seen dramatic increases in the number of truancy cases. This paper reports on various studies that have been completed on the link between truancy, poverty, and self esteem. Recent research indicates strong correlations between poverty and self esteem with truancy. This paper reports on the research findings on self esteem, poverty, and truancy with freshman students at Grayson County High School in Leitchfield, Kentucky. The study shows that there is a strong correlation between self esteem and truancy.

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Introduction

Problem Statement

School Absenteeism (commonly known in today's society as truancy) has been a long standing problem of school institutions across the nation and the world. Most recently truancy has received considerable hype from local politicians, school administrators and the media as a breakdown in education. This concern has forced many states to develop legislation on defining truancy, and holding parents accountable in the court system. This media hype and response by legislators has brought to the forefront a leading question: what are the reasons children are missing school?

While there is no easy answer to this question, there have been numerous explanations. Since the early 1950's truancy has been studied on various levels, with a multitude of research on the reasons children do not come to school. In a study completed by Ming Zhang (2003) reported that most troublesome concern with truancy is how to define it. Each school district or county seems to have their own individualized definition of truancy, and this often leads to various misconceptions. According to Gleeson (1995) if the problem of truancy is left unchecked it will threaten the national school curriculum because schools will lose large amounts of funding. However Gleeson reports that the problem can be isolated more heavily in certain areas such as higher poverty such as inner cities and rural towns. While Gleeson relates truancy to poverty, others have opposing views.

Zhang states that the other aspect to truancy is related to schools not being prepared to deal with students. He further explains in his article that schools are understaffed, underpaid, and not equipped to handle today's students (Zhang, 2003). These concerns were often voiced by

administrators and school staff during his research as being a cause for truancy. Zhang does insist that the relationship between poverty and absenteeism is much stronger than these concerns. In a related article by Julie Miller this idea is further expressed as being the cause for the breakdown of Mississippi's Educational System. According to Miller (2004) Mississippi is "one of the poorest states in the nation" and has one of the highest poverty rates across the nation as well (p.317). She also reports in her article that the state of Mississippi has one of the highest rates of truancy for elementary students (Miller, 2004). While she is not totally convinced that poverty alone is the sole cause of the truancy, she states that there is a strong correlation between the two. There are other issues she identifies that play a major role on child school attendance such as bullying, low self esteem, attitudes of parents, and the parents education (Miller, 2004). Zhang agrees with Miller that bullying or a child being picked on is a key concern among school administrators as a cause for children to miss school.

Miller, Zhang, and Gleeson all report on the shifts of truancy concerns over the past 20 years. The 1970's were an era of research linking affects of poverty to school absenteeism. However since the 1980's there has been more of a shift to not focus on issues of poverty because the media has depicted truant children as lazy, hard to discipline, and having unconcerned parents.

Due to this shift in how truancy is being viewed today Zhang felt the need to explore the relationship between child poverty and absenteeism. Zhang did report in his study the difficulty in coming up with a measuring tool to define truancy and poverty. Zhang concluded that he would include both unexcused and excused absents in his research study and defined poverty by those children that received free lunches (Zhang, 2003). He completed a study of London's schools from 1997 to 2000 using a postal survey and interviewing of education practitioners.

The article by Gleeson reports on a survey of various agencies including schools, social services, police, and the court system. Gleeson realizes his survey is a more comprehensive view of how truancy is viewed by the public but that it is subjected to biases of the media. Julie Miller took a different approach to her research in studying causes of truancy. Miller gathers her research through data analysis of various data basis and reports of schools in the state of Mississippi.

Miller's findings were that nearly half of Mississippi's school children were able to be identified as living in poverty; this classification was concluded by the amount of children that receive a free school lunch. According to Miller (2004) there were significantly higher rates of truancy among students that did receive free school lunches, which she concluded as a relationship to poverty. This was significant in proving the relationship to truancy, but found that there where likely other causes to truancy as well. Due to the issues of segregation in Mississippi many of the parents and grandparents of children received little education. This she believes plays a role in the parents believing that school is unimportant. Lastly she reports that a large portion of schools in Mississippi continue to be segregated because the Caucasian children attend private schools while many African American children continue to attend public schools.

While there seems to be many similarities with the findings of Miller, Gleeson breaks his study down to specific reasons that poverty stricken children miss school. According to Gleeson (1995) children with inadequate clothing, poor personal hygiene, and ill health are all causes of school truancy in children living in poverty. He also expresses that personal opinion of other students leads to truancy in elementary aged children. He explains that being known as the "free lunch child" can be emotionally damaging and lead the child to school discomfort (Gleeson, 1995, p. 35). This in turn could lead to lower self-esteem or a segregation from family and friend

due to fear of embarrassment. Gleeson does make a point that this issue seems to have more affect on the children of the elementary level, and not as much affect on adolescents. This finding shows truancy among adolescents and teenagers is caused by other reasons than poverty. For social work practitioners it serves notice to bring special attention to the adolescent individual behavior patterns rather than over the family's economic status.

The notion that school absenteeism is strongly associated with child poverty with people of primary school as opposed to secondary schools was also a finding of Zhang's research (Zhang, 2003). Zhang (2003) states that child poverty is eventually replaced with peer relationships and youth offending as the primary cause for truancy in adolescents and teenagers. While there is a shift in the reason for truancy he concluded that poverty was still statistically significant. Another significant finding was that children's parents that received long term state benefits were more likely to miss school than the children that received short-term benefits (Zhang, 2003). This reexamines the need for social work practitioners and legislators to make policies to assist clients to get out of the system more easily.

In critiquing the measuring techniques Zhang's seem to be the most effective because he used both surveys and interviews. He did find difficulties in defining poverty and truancy, and did feel that his definition of poverty may not be a great indicator of poverty. Zhang's study does not report the makeup of his respondents or how many surveys were sent out. Zhang only reports that 98 surveys were used in his data collection. There is some concern that he could have left out diverse groups of people, especially those that were not interested in completing his survey.

The study completed by Miller with the state of Mississippi school system could be generalized to the entire states public school system. It was used with available data which was

collected by various school districts, and analyzed to come up with her findings. One area of concern is that school free lunch was again used as the defining factor of poverty. Miller concluded that while nearly fifty percent of the state is classified as receiving school lunches while nearly eighty percent are eligible (Miller, 2004). Her definition could have some effects on her data analysis. Also she concluded that African Americans make up a majority of the children in public schools, and there is little notice of diversity issues related to this topic. Miller also reports that many Caucasian attend private school, but does not mention any aspects of data collection for private schools in her research. Gleeson on the other hand completed a more random sample of society to get the views of the linkage between poverty and education. His survey could be defined more as an opinion poll of how people view education. The survey could only be applied to views of the people completely the survey.

While truancy and poverty seem to have a strong correlation to each other, there seems to be other factors that lead to truancy. One area of concern is with the self esteem levels of truant students. Research has demonstrated that self-esteem is an important issue to address because of its effects on academic achievement (Glenn & Nelson, 1998, Bartz & Matthews, 2001). While there has been little research in this area of study, the research that has been carried out points to a strong correlation between low self esteem and truancy. This further examines the need for each district and state to research the issues that affect truancy in their area. Further examination of more focused studies such as on elementary school children or adolescents would greatly benefit school administrators, social workers, and the court system. This would allow a more proactive approach to stopping truancy before it becomes an issue that requires involvement in the court system.

Research Question

What is the relationship between a truant child living in poverty and low self esteem?

Hypothesis

Truant children living in poverty will have higher rates of lower self esteem than those truants not living in poverty.

Method

Research Design

The research design that was used is explanatory, and utilized a one time cross-sectional survey (using the Rosenberg Self Esteem instrument). My data was quantitative in terms of demographic information and self esteem score. The independent variable is truant children living in poverty, and dependent variable is self esteem.

Instrumentation

The researcher will use the Rosenberg Self Esteem instrument which is a 10 item questionnaire. The questionnaire will allow the research to calculate an overall self esteem score between 10 and 30. If the score is 16 or lower it indicates that there is a very strong likelihood that the person has low self esteem.

Sampling Method

My sampling method will involve a purposive sample size of students that are defined as freshman at a high school level. There will be two groups of students (truant and non-truant); each will be composed of approximately 15 students each. The groups will also include an adequate representation of the school in categories of race or ethnicity and poverty. The groups will be selected by Grayson County High School Faculty or Administrators.

Study Site

The subjects will be selected through the Grayson County School System. The Grayson County

High School is located at 340 Schoolhouse Road in Leitchfield, KY.

Informed Consent and Confidentiality

Informed consent forms were given to the students selected in the survey to take home for their parents to complete before the study. The children (minors) were also asked to complete an assent form before the survey instrument was administered on the day of the test. Only those students whom have both completed consent and assent forms were administered the survey instrument. The student were made aware that they could stop at any point during the research process. The participants remained anonymous, with no names or identifying marks were included on the survey instrument.

Data Collection

In terms of data collection procedures, after the participants had the proper informed consent and assent forms they were administered the survey instrument as a group. The instrument was administered on at one point in time, with the procedure taking less than 20 minutes. This occurred with both groups at the Grayson County High School on March 31, 2005.

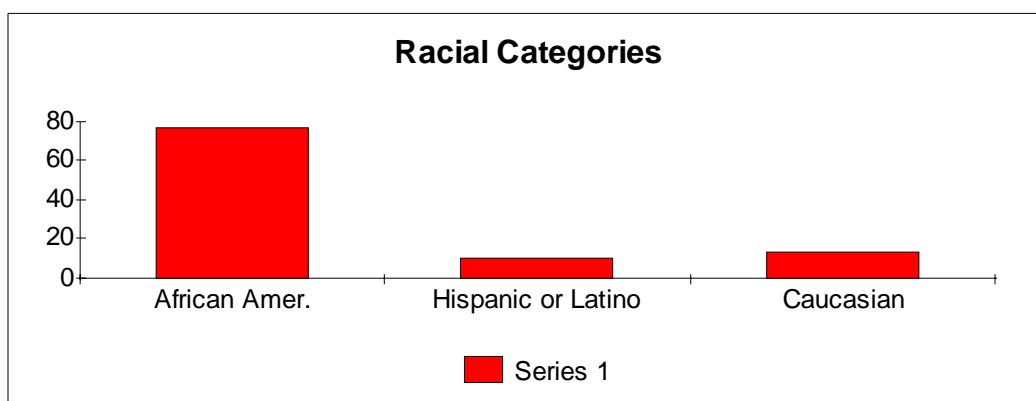
Statistical Analysis

Quantitative data was analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Statistics including mean, median, mode, range, variance, and standard deviation were completed on the data collected. The study had quantitative data in the questionnaire. Descriptive statistics were also completed on various areas including age of student and self esteem scores.

Results

The sample size include 30 high school students that classified themselves as freshman. The overall range of Self Esteem Scores (SES) was 16, having scores on the Rosenberg Self

Esteem Scale ranging from 12 to 28. The overall median SES for both groups was 18.5, with a mean of 19.63. The standard deviation was 5.2. In terms of age the median age was 15. The races that were included were 76.7% Caucasian, Hispanic or Latino with 10%, and African American 13.3% (this is seen in the figure 1.1).



The groups were further broken down into students who receive free lunch vs. those that do not receive free lunch. The students in the sample size that received free lunch included 70, with only 30 percent of the students reporting they did not receive free lunch. For the student that reported receiving free lunch the mean SES was 15.75, with a median of 15. This indicates that the average student whom receives free in the sample could have self esteem problems.

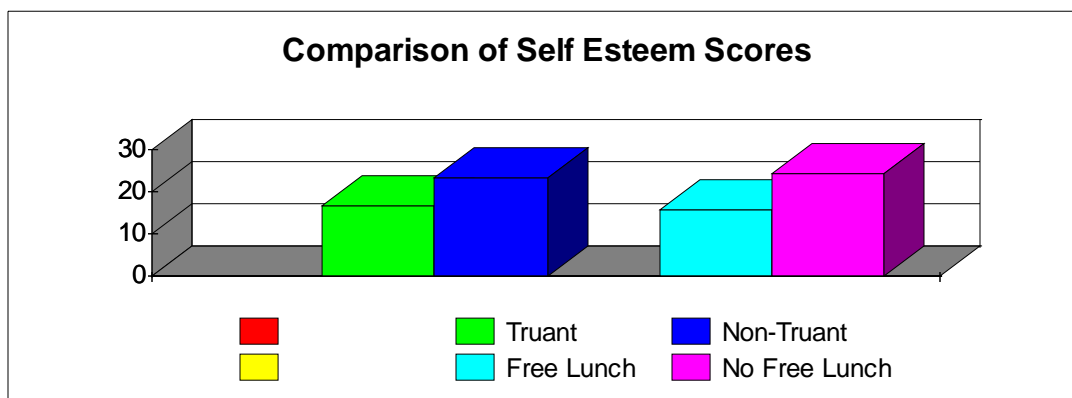


Figure 4.1

For those students that were administered the survey it was significant to note that there was a strong negative correlation for self esteem and truancy. The correlation was $-.83$ and indicates that as the students miss more days there is a decrease in their self esteem score. The mean for the truant students was 16.7, for those classified themselves as non-truant the mean was 23.3 which places it on the moderate to high self esteem end.

Regarding female and male students there were near equal representation, with 16 males and 14 females. There seems to be little discrepancies in terms of self esteem scores between males and females. For the males the mean self esteem score was 19.8 and for females it was 20.2. This places both groups above the point of 16 which indicates that the student likely has self esteem problems. Interestingly there were extremely high a level of minorities included in the group even though the community is approximately 96% Caucasian. There were no significant indications in the SES of the various racial classes.

Discussion

The studies findings were for the most part consistent with the current literature on self esteem scores and truancy. While the average self esteem score on all the groups does not fall in the category of having self low self esteem various groups have overall self esteem scores that indicate self esteem problems. Students whom indicated that they received free lunch also had lower self esteem scores. This greatly affects the study and shows that there could be other attributing factors that lead to lower self esteem among the students.

In terms of assisting social work professionals it would be important to properly assess for self esteem issues. In develop an intervention for a child with low self-esteem focusing on long term goals such as having the student demonstrate the ability to verbalize positive self-

descriptive statements on a regular basis and reducing their self-doubting. Another immediate goal of a self-esteem intervention would include for the child or teenager in a close and trusting relationship with a therapist and significant others. Lastly a successful short-term objective for a student with low self-esteem would be to verbalize reasonable and attainable personal goals and to identify sources of low self-esteem and feelings of insecurity.

Limitations

Even though it appears that there is a strong correlation with self esteem and school success, there are likely various factors that could be prevalent among the students. Some of these causes could include poor grades, absenteeism, school discipline problems, dislike of school or the student's background. This leads to a limitation of the study because it did not allow for the students to express other opinions about how they feel about school.

Along with the research only be quantitative there are other limitations that need to be noted. The sample size was a relatively small number of the students in the Grayson County High School. The sample size has low external validity outside of the group that was selected. There may have been some sampling manipulation because the faculty included relatively higher amounts of minorities than what is enrolled in the school system. The sample size was also selected by faculty of the school system, which could have implications on the SES. The students placed in the truant group could have also have behavior problems or other factors that could affect there self esteem levels.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study further demonstrates that there is a strong correlation between low self esteem scores and truancy. It also makes note that other factors such as the student's environment such as living in poverty could have negative impacts on self esteem among high school students.

While SES were radically different in some groups it was clear that there were very few differences among sex or racial classes in the school.

In future research it would be important to have more qualitative questions to get a more accurate picture of truancy. It is certainly evident that a major factor is with poverty, and further research with the relationship of poverty and self esteem could be of great benefit this area of study.

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